

**MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
SPECIAL MEETING
MARCH 26, 2020
MINUTES**

Chairman Tate called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m. as provided for in the Notice of Special Meeting of the Macon County Board of Commissioners, a copy of which is attached **(Attachment 1)** and is hereby made a part of these minutes. All Board Members, County Manager Derek Roland, Deputy Clerk Mike Decker, several county department heads and members of the news media were present. County Attorney Chester Jones joined the meeting via telephone.

Chairman Tate stated that the purpose of the special meeting was for county health, emergency management and administration officials to update the board on the COVID-19 situation in Macon County.

Macon County Interim Health Director Carmine Rocco presented a PowerPoint presentation, a copy of which is attached **(Attachment 2)** and is hereby made a part of these minutes. Mr. Rocco gave the board a brief overview of the Coronavirus, its symptoms and how it is spread. He focused attention on prevention of the illness, including practicing social distancing, proper hand washing, when to avoid contact with others, covering coughs and increased cleaning. He looked first at the national picture, and showed maps that contained statistics on COVID-19 as of March 3, then March 18 and then March 25. He noted this is a fast spreading disease that is stopped only by social distancing. He said the number of deaths nationwide now topped 1,000 and the number was doubling every two to four days. From a regional perspective, Mr. Rocco said Macon County is in a “basin” that is relatively free of the virus right now, but also pointed out, “We are surrounded by COVID-19.” He voiced concerns over Mission Hospital in Asheville filling up, and therefore being unable to accept patients from other areas in the region such as Franklin. He then moved on to testing, saying that the single largest number of tests were conducted on March 16th, and to date 56 COVID tests have been performed, but there are no positive tests among Macon County residents. He said the health department’s call center has taken 360 calls as of March 25th, and that the department posts up-to-date information on its Facebook page. He noted that it is taking several days to get test results back, and to be tested, an individual needs to have a fever, lower respiratory issues and a negative flu test result. He said public health has more than 20 test kits available, and warned that a

vaccine could be a year to 18 months away. Commissioner Higdon said that “personal responsibility has been a great asset in Macon County” and gave credit to the county’s citizens. However, he questioned what he called a “hodge-podge approach” to shutting things down, and questioned why the county was planning to go to not allowing gatherings of more than 10 people if the state’s number is 50, and Mr. Rocco said the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is recommending no more than 10. Commissioner Higdon also said that deaths from the flu this year far outnumber deaths from the Coronavirus, adding that the shutdown will keep workers from getting a paycheck. He questioned what the long-range plan is for factoring in “a major economic impact.” Mr. Rocco responded that a rapid increase in the number of cases could result in the health system failing, which will lead to more economic problems, which is why the effort is to reduce the peak and “flatten the curve.” Mr. Rocco said he remains concerned about an influx of individuals coming into the area and that everyone must practice social distancing. Commissioner Higdon stated that the proposed proclamation needs to be reviewed prior to the board’s next meeting. Commissioner Gillespie raised questions about the number of deaths attributed to the virus, and asked Mr. Rocco to speculate about Georgia’s numbers, which exceed North Carolina’s. Commissioner Beale said an article in the *New York Times* this morning listed Macon County “as the place to go to.” Mr. Rocco responded by saying would you come here to put your grandma at risk, adding that such decisions come down to “personal responsibility.”

Macon County Emergency Management Director Warren Cabe explained that emergency management is “the logistical arm of something like this” and is the county’s connection to resources acquired by North Carolina Emergency Management. He said he has been in contact with hospitals and other agencies to determine the amount of supplies they have on hand and what the “burn rate” for those are, noting there are “some things you just can’t get.” He said that he has received “one percent of what we’ve ordered,” adding that it is hard to get COVID-19 test kits. While the total number of calls to 9-1-1 has been “very similar to last year at the same time,” he said there was a 50 percent increase in respiratory-related calls and a 400 percent increase in the number of chest pain-related calls. Mr. Cabe told the board he would speak again later in the meeting.

Mr. Roland told the board that the county is taking steps as much as possible to observe and acknowledge risks and to protect employees while continuing to operate on normal business hours in most instances. From an organizational standpoint, he said that high-risk individuals have been identified and “work from home” capabilities addressed. He added that mechanisms to ensure that certain procedures, such as payroll and other critical processes, would be able to work remotely if needed. He noted that many departments are doing temperature monitoring of employees at the start of each work day, and that other protective measures, such as extra cleaning and sanitation, have been

enhanced. He talked about the effect of the virus on individual departments, and pointed out where closings were in effect. Commissioner Higdon asked about additional operating costs in connection with COVID-19, and Mr. Roland said they have been minimal thus far, and that Finance is tracking all COVID-19 related expenses.

Chairman Tate asked if there was a motion to approve the "Supplemental Proclamation of State of Emergency For Macon County, North Carolina." Commissioner Beale made a motion to approve the proclamation, and it was seconded by Commissioner Shields. A lengthy discussion followed, and Mr. Cabe provided some background. He explained that the regulations that stem from the state of emergency "fall on my shoulders," and he has had to make some very difficult decisions. Explaining that he is "fairly conservative," he told the board that these decisions "don't rest lightly on me." He further explained his belief that the county must "err on the side of caution," as "we're at war with something we can't see." He said that although his fight is not necessarily with COVID-19, he must take action to maintain the healthcare system. He told the board that his request was to "put in place the regulations you have in front of you," which are contained in a document entitled, "Regulations Imposed in Macon County (less the Towns of Franklin and Highlands) by the Macon County Emergency Management Coordinator in Connection with COVID-19 Pandemic." A copy of that document is attached (Attachment 3) and is hereby made a part of these minutes. He explained that those regulations would limit gatherings of people to no more than 10, and would close motels and hotels as of 5 p.m. on Friday, March 27, 2020, with certain exemptions. "We want to protect our residents," he said, and told the board that he would be reviewing the status of the regulations on a daily basis. He also pointed out regulations to screen individuals entering the county at the airport. He again told the board that he didn't take the regulations lightly, adding this has been "one of the hardest processes I've been through in my career," noting that he and other will be judged "by what we do now." Chairman Tate told Mr. Cabe, "You've got my full support." During the continued discussion, Commissioner Higdon argued for "private sector input" into these decisions, stating, "People who are guaranteed a paycheck are having control over people who have no input and not guaranteed a paycheck." He also raised questions about individuals coming into the county to close real estate transactions, and said he did not see the need to update the county's initial state of emergency proclamation. Following additional discussion, Commissioner Beale made a motion to approve the supplemental proclamation, and it was seconded by Commissioner Shields. Mr. Cabe said the supplemental proclamation declares there is a problem in the county, and ultimately the problem is his to address, and he is doing so through the regulations he has placed in the document. He said the board can change those regulations at a regular meeting, or it could be done at a special called meeting like the one today. Mr. Jones pointed out that Mr. Cabe "can make changes as

things go along.” Mr. Cabe added that if things change within a week, “I shoulder the responsibility of taking it off,” and told Commissioner Higdon, “You need to ask those questions.” Commissioner Gillespie asked a number of questions about the limit on the size of a gathering, restrictions on lodging and visitors at the airport, and asked about those with “a legitimate reason to be here.” Mr. Cabe responded that it was allowable as long as it was related to commerce, but “not just to get away from somewhere else.” Commissioner Gillespie told Mr. Cabe that he appreciated the process [Mr. Cabe] has gone through, and said these are “very necessary conversations” to have. The discussion then turned to individuals with second homes in the county, and Mr. Cabe noted they can still come here, but must isolate for 14 days to make sure they are not infected. This led to discussion about enforcement of this provision. At this point, Mr. Rocco interjected that he initially wanted to close any access to Macon County from anyone outside, and this was a compromise “done with the best intentions.” Commissioner Higdon said the problem with the supplemental proclamation was that it can’t be reviewed for 19 days, and he could not support that, saying, “This is a day to day issue.” Mr. Cabe told Commissioner Higdon, “I promise you we will look at it day to day.” Following discussion about some of the details of the county’s emergency management ordinance, the board voted 4-1, with Commissioner Higdon opposing, to approve the “Supplemental Proclamation of State of Emergency for Macon County, North Carolina,” a copy of which is attached (Attachment 4) and is hereby made a part of these minutes. Chairman Tate noted the orders in the notice of special meeting that directs distribution of this document to the media and to have county staff distribute it via the county website, social media and other methods.

Chairman Tate then discussed and read a letter he was proposing to have sent to all county residents regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the letter would warn of an influx of people that could overtax a very limited healthcare system that has 62 hospital beds and seven ventilators for a population of approximately 34,000 people. Commissioner Beale said he thought the county’s second homeowners would appreciate the letter and would understand what we are trying to do. Commissioner Shields said he wanted to make sure the letter was not in conflict with the state of emergency proclamation. Commissioner Gillespie called it “a well drafted letter.” Commissioner Higdon said he liked the language regarding “respectfully requesting” that they not come to the county. No action on the letter was necessary.

Commissioner Beale recognized Dr. Gus Wilde, who made some brief comments to the board, noting that the presentation slide of Mr. Rocco’s that shows the exponential increase in cases of the virus “scares me.”

With no other business, at 6:48 p.m., upon a motion by Commissioner Beale, seconded by Commissioner Gillespie, the board voted unanimously to adjourn.

Derek Roland
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board

Jim Tate
Board Chairman